

A tropical beach scene with a wooden mast and a straw hat in the foreground. The mast is made of weathered wood and has several ropes attached to it. The hat is a wide-brimmed straw hat with a small orange detail. The background shows a sandy beach, turquoise water, and a blue sky with white clouds.

# THE COSTCO CONNECTION

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MEDIA BAKERY

# Retailing that pops

Temporary stores have a lasting impact on sales for small-business owners

By Gord Woodward

REMEMBER YOUR EXCITEMENT as a child when opening a pop-up book, its contents leaping off the page at you?

Well, retailers across the country are trying to re-create that excitement. Only instead of using words and illustrations and paper, they're showcasing everything from beef bourguignon to sound and lighting equipment to clothing.

Welcome to the world of pop-up shops.

Also known as flash stores, these temporary outlets "pop up" at different venues, enticing buyers with the promise of something surprising and exciting. They usually shut down almost as quickly as they opened. But the merchants behind them are finding the results they achieve are anything but temporary.

"The exposure has been invaluable to me," says Costco member Liz Ingram-Chambers, owner of Le Bistro by Liz in Halifax (*lebistrohalifax.com*). She put together a pop-up for one afternoon last spring to help remedy a long-time marketing challenge for her French bistro. "People can't find my location," she says. Her pop-up store, one block from her business, sold out of its servings of beef bourguignon. More important, though, it created customer awareness: "I was promoting my restaurant for future exposure."

Sinan Leylek, of Spark Rentals Inc. in Winnipeg (*sparkrentals.ca*), similarly had his eye on the future. He used a three-month pop-up last summer in a downtown mall

space to launch his firm, which rents sound, lighting and effects equipment. He took advantage of the time to determine whether to settle into a retail or e-commerce home.

"Having an indoor shop during the warm, sunny days of July can be a challenge to drive interest from foot traffic," he says, "but people were taking notice and I was able to start measuring that as sales started to increase."

The experience convinced him to focus on the Internet, and a small retail presence is still a possibility.

In Vancouver, Costco member Deb Nichol has been using pop-ups for more than a decade. She owns The Latest Scoop (*thelatestscoop.ca*), selling clothing and furniture.

Her first store was open just three weeks. The response? "Quite phenomenal." She next popped up for more than two months. Again, buyers were free with their cash. "It was hard to justify closing."

Now Nichol has a permanent store while continuing to run a pop-up at various locations around the city. More than a quarter of her inventory at the pop-ups turns over every couple of weeks. And she only runs them seasonally, avoiding the fashion industry's dog days of January and February. She notes, "When you're in a pop-up you can write your own rules."

Those rules are a little different from the ones governing traditional retail stores, says Costco member Kristen De Palma. She man-

ages strategic initiatives for Credit Union Atlantic (*cua.com*) in Halifax, which organized a series of Saturday pop-ups last summer for its members.

"Pop-ups are a great way for businesses to showcase their products and services in a more informal environment that encourages conversation," says De Palma. The emphasis is on engaging buyers rather than pushing sales.

"You're doing this to generate buzz," explains Costco member Sally Seston, managing director of Retail Category Consultants in Toronto (*retailconsultant.ca*).

Think of pop-ups as a marketing tool, she advises. Renting a kiosk, commercial space or even a small trailer can help you get the word out in a short-lived burst. The novelty factor appeals to buyers, regardless of what you sell: "Consumers love to discover new things." 📱

Costco member Gord Woodward is a writer and business author in Nanaimo, British Columbia.

## Success in a flash

HERE ARE SOME tips for successfully running a pop-up business.

- **Have a plan.** Make sure your pop-up fits your brand and has specific marketing goals. "It has to be part of a bigger strategy," says Sally Seston, managing director of Retail Category Consultants in Toronto.

- **Be picky about location.** To find vacant space, try sites such as *thestorefront.com*, which helps business owners find available retail space in their area. Or, call your local mall manager or a commercial leasing agent.

- **Keep the design simple.** "We can set up a store in four days, tear down in one," says Deb Nichol of The Latest Scoop.

- **Give buyers a reason to come in.** Offer consumers something they haven't seen before, such as a new product or a deal on an existing one.

- **Pre-promote.** Since pop-ups aren't around for long, you need to draw customers right away. Let people know you're coming before you open.

- **Be outgoing.** Use a fun hashtag on social media. Be bold with signage. And no sitting behind a counter; talk with everyone who comes by.

- **Time your exit.** Three months is about the maximum to keep the doors open. The shorter the duration, the more urgency buyers may feel.—GW